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AUTHOR Senander, Kristin L.; Kantor, Jane M.
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ABSTRACT

A study examined the effects of parental divorce on college students, comparing college students in five areas of social development according to parental marital status: evaluation of parent/child relationships; relationship commitment and satisfaction; dating frequency and satisfaction; attitudes toward marriage; and sexual activity and satisfaction. Subjects, 191 students at a small, private liberal arts university, completed a three-page questionnaire. Results indicated three differences between students from intact and divorced families: students from divorced families had a less favorable perception of their relationship with their father, were more cautious about frequent dating, and rated premarital cohabitation as more acceptable. (Twenty references and the survey questionnaire are attached.) (SR)

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An Evaluation of the Effects of Parental Divorce on College Students

Kristin L. Senander
Jane M. Kantor

3323 North 10th
Tacoma, Washington 98406
(206)756-4052

University of Puget Sound

Debut Student Paper

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Summary

The majority of studies dealing with the effects of divorce have focused on children and adolescents, and their academic and emotional adjustment. One hundred and ninety-one students at a small, private liberal arts university participated in a study of the effects of parental divorce on college-aged individuals. Three differences between students from intact and divorced families were found: students from divorced families had a less favorable perception of their relationship with their father, were more cautious about frequent dating, and rated premarital cohabitation as more acceptable. This research expands on the traditional studies, examining social differences which are still prevalent during the college years, including the assessment of parental relationships, levels of commitment, dating frequency and satisfaction, and likelihood of cohabitation.

Introduction

"Divorce" has become so integrated into our vocabulary that we have become immune to the power of the word. Divorce rates have increased nearly 200% since 1960 (17). Divorce has become a dominant event in American social life. It affects the lives of millions of children and adolescents annually, and many have experienced divorce firsthand and have been affected by the trauma of parental separation. Americans are growing accustomed to a disposable society, but the disruption of family commitment has had serious consequences not only for the parents, but also the children of divorce. These consequences can include lower self-esteem, decreased social adjustment, and doubts about personal ability to maintain a relationship.

Previous studies have assessed levels of self-confidence, perception of parents, and social development in children of divorced families. Several studies have reported lowered self-confidence levels in young children of divorce (7, 10, 12, 13, 19) and college females (20). However, one study contradicted this finding (16), and another reported higher levels of emotional independence (11). None of these studies followed through to courtship behavior (7, 10, 11, 12). Children of divorced families reported a less favorable perception of their parents (4, 10, 14, 15), especially their fathers (14). Concerning studies of social development, researchers have found fear of disappointment in love relationships among children of divorce (18, 19). Satisfaction levels were related to the child's perceived level of parental conflict (3, 15, 16). Another researcher concluded, however, that the differences in social development could not be attributed to divorce or environmental factors (5).

Children of divorce seem to possess definite attitudes about the institution of marriage. Several studies concluded that children from divorced families tended to have less positive attitudes toward marriage (1, 6, 8, 9). However, students from divorced families who reported a closer relationship to parents had a more positive attitude toward marriage (2). For example, Kelly found that five years after parental divorce, most respondents did not view marriage as desirable (8). The subjects failed to see the intimacy, companionship, and nurturance that can exist and develop in a marriage (1, 8). However, in a follow-up study, Wallerstein found that children and adolescents of divorce as a group were "strongly committed to the ideals of a lasting marriage" (18).

Unfortunately, most studies on divorce have focused on children under eighteen years of age. The effects of divorce on college students have been largely ignored. The purpose of the present study was to compare college students in five areas of social development as an extension of the traditional studies involving children and adolescents. This comparison was made by separating the respondents according to parental marital status. The strategy was to compare the students' evaluation of parent/child relationships, relationship commitment and satisfaction, dating frequency and satisfaction, attitudes toward marriage, and sexual activity and satisfaction.

Parental divorce has been identified as a significant influence on children and adolescents. College students may be different because they generally are more mature and have greater independence. However, the effects of rejection and guilt associated with divorce and the consequences of witnessing previous marital failure may not end when the child leaves home. With this in mind, we attempted to test four hypotheses as follows:

1) Subjects from divorced families would have a lower assessment of their parental relationships, and this trend would be more marked with male subjects; 2) Subjects from divorced families would express lower levels of commitment in relationships or marriage than subjects from intact families; 3) Subjects from divorced families are likely to date more frequently but express lower levels of satisfaction with their dating than subjects from intact families; 4) Subjects from divorced families are more likely to cohabit than subjects from intact families.

Methods

Location and Subjects: The sample was drawn from students at a small, private liberal arts university on the West Coast. Six hundred questionnaires were distributed to be completed on a voluntary basis in randomly selected required courses. Of the 600 questionnaires, 191 were returned (32% compliance rate), the majority of which were completed in class.

Procedure: A three page questionnaire was developed through a literature review and preliminary interviews. The questionnaire (Appendix A) required an estimated completion time of twenty minutes.

Respondents were given a series of Likert scales, with "1" being least satisfied and "5" being most satisfied for the following questions: "How would you describe your relationship with your parents (mother/father)", "Rate your satisfaction with your amount of dating", and "How do you feel about premarital sex?" The remaining questions were formatted as follows: "If your parents are divorced or remarried, which parent did you live with after the divorce?", "How you would you describe your level of commitment?" (low, medium, high), "How often do you date?" (once a

week, two or more times a week, every other week, once a month, or other), "Would you like to live with someone before getting married?" (yes/no). In addition to these questions, demographic data were also requested. Standard statistical analysis was conducted using SPSSX.

Results

Consistent with the university's demographics, 60% of the participants were female and 40% were male. The respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 45, with a mean of 23 years. The respondents included students from each academic major; 32% of the respondents had yet to declare a major, 20% were business majors, 20% were humanities majors, 10% were science and mathematics majors, 10% were social science majors, 3% were occupational and physical therapy majors, 4% were education majors, and 1% were fine arts majors.

The student population was estimated by the university's financial assistance office to be as follows: 66% from intact families, 27.5% from divorced families, and 6.5% from families separated for other reasons. In the sample, 72% of the respondents came from intact families, while 25% came from families where divorce had occurred. Three percent came from families where separation had occurred for reasons other than divorce.

Hypothesis #1: Subjects from divorced families would have a lower assessment of their parental relationships, and this trend would be more marked with male subjects. Respondents from intact families rated their relationship with their father at an average of 4.19 (on a scale of 1 to 5), compared to an average of 3.09 for respondents from divorces families ($t(162) = 5.93$, $p < .001$). The mean ratings for the relationships with mothers was not significant.

Both the intact and divorced groups reported a better relationship with their mother than their father (mean = 4.40 compared to 3.93, $t(166) = 4.78$, $p < .001$). The difference was even more pronounced among respondents from divorced families (mean = 4.33 compared to 3.10, $t(41) = 4.20$, $p < 0.001$). However, when the father had custody, the pattern was reversed. Students from divorced families with paternal custody tended to rate their relationship with their father as better than with their mother (mean = 4.00 compared to 2.91, $p < .10$).

The assessment of parent-child relationships may have been affected by a social desirability bias, because the ratings of both the divorced and intact groups were particularly high. Seventy-five percent of the respondents gave their father-child relationship a value of 4 or 5; 78% of the respondents gave their mother-child relationship a value of 4 or 5.

Hypothesis #2: Subjects from divorced families would express lower levels of commitment in relationships or marriage than subjects from intact families. Of those subjects responding to the question asking them to rate their level of commitment to their partner (58% of respondents), in a 2-way ANOVA by parents' marital status and gender, the main effects were significant for parents' marital status but not for gender (F (df = 1, 79) = 4.626, $p < .05$). The subjects' from intact families mean level of commitment was 2.41, while subjects' from divorced families mean was 2.80. Interestingly, no subject from the divorced group who responded indicated a low level of commitment. These findings contradict our hypothesis. Neither the comparison between the divorced to the intact group, nor between men to women within the divorced group were statistically significant.

Hypothesis #3: Subjects from divorced families are likely to date more frequently but express lower levels of satisfaction with their dating than subjects from intact families. Self-reported dating frequencies revealed that those from divorced families dated significantly less often ($t(151) = 2.04$, $p < .05$). When asked to respond to a yes/no question about satisfaction with amount of dating, no differences were observed between the divorced and intact groups.

Hypothesis #4: Subjects from divorced families are more likely to cohabit than subjects from intact families. This rate was higher for those from divorced families (79.5% from divorced families compared to 56.0% from intact families, chi-square (2df) = 7.14, $p < .05$). Overall, 75% of the males, but only 53% of the females intend to cohabit (chi-square (2df) = 9.89, $p < .01$). The likelihood of cohabitation was still more pronounced when comparing males to females within the divorced group (100% males compared to 66% females, chi-square (1df) = 6.29, $p < .05$). Within the intact families, 67% of the males and 45% of the females reported intent to cohabit (chi-square, (2df) = 7.35, $p < .05$). The differences between men from divorced and intact families was significant (chi-square (1 df) = 6.57, $p < .05$), but for women the difference was not statistically significant (chi-square (1df) = 3.24, $p < .10$).

Limitations: When considering the results reported in this paper, the limitations must be acknowledged. The response rate was low and the sample was obtained at a small, private university. This may limit generalizability, but it does show that, for at least some sectors of the population, the negative effects of divorce are carried beyond childhood and adolescence, into the college years.

Discussion

Parent-Child Relationships: Subjects from intact families rated their fathers higher than subjects from divorced families. Apparently, because most children of divorced families live with their mother, the father becomes an absent parent, and the relationship between father and child deteriorates. Subjects who had divorced parents and lived with their father rated their relationship with their father as better than with their mother. A possible explanation for this is that custody does not usually go to the father: when the father does win custody, it may be a sign that the mother was judged to be unstable, or because of a previous preference voiced by the children. Other researchers have also suggested that children of a divorced family have a less favorable perception of both parental relationships (4, 10, 14). There were no statistical findings in this study that reflected poorer perceived relationships between the mother and child.

Respondents reported better relationships with their mother than with their father. For respondents with divorced parents, this result was even more pronounced. Parental divorce seems to intensify a student's preference for their mother.

Relationship Commitment: When currently involved in a relationship, respondents from divorced families described higher levels of commitment than respondents from intact families. This observation could follow from the careful consideration in date selection, resulting in a more compatible relationship once it has begun. Another explanation for the increased commitment could be linked to the respondents' less favorable report of parent-child relationships. Perhaps because they are not as able as children from intact families to turn to parents for support, these children may rely more heavily on their dating partner, resulting in higher

commitment levels. Another explanation may be that they do not want to make the same mistakes their parents did.

Dating Frequency and Level of Satisfaction: Our findings did not support our hypothesis that respondents from divorced families would date more frequently than students from intact families. On the contrary, it seems that respondents from divorced families were more cautious about their dating, reporting fewer dates than students from intact families. Perhaps this difference was due to more practiced care and concern as to whom they date, resulting in a lower dating frequency. It could also result from an increased feeling of insecurity about relationships, as Wallerstein found (18, 19).

Attitudes Toward Premarital Cohabitation: The results showed differences in comparing respondents' attitudes toward premarital cohabitation. Those with divorced parents reported a preference to live with their partner before marriage. These findings provide a better clue to understanding the differences in attitudes toward marriage between respondents from divorced and intact families. It is likely that these students have witnessed a failed marriage and want to give their relationships a better chance of success. This is consistent with Wallerstein's findings that children from divorced families have more fear of disappointment in love relationships than children from intact families (18).

Implications: We can draw some preliminary conclusions from these data. A distinguishable pattern has emerged through the overall research on divorce. Children from families of divorce tend to be more cautious in their emotional attachment regarding a significant other. Children who have witnessed the emotional, financial, and legal tribulations of divorce

may be less confident in their ability to form a good relationship or may be more likely to have a stronger inclination to avoid making a similar mistake in their own lives. Thus, for respondents from divorced families, the lower frequency of dating and greater approval of cohabitation could be a technique for avoiding the possibility of marriage.

While respondents from divorced families reported fewer dates, they also described relationships with higher commitment. However, it is interesting that as these apparently more committed relationships progress, respondents from divorced families reported a higher preference to live with their partner before marriage, suggesting that they may be unsure of their own judgment in date selection or of committed support.

Thank you for participating in our survey. The information that you provide will be kept strictly confidential and your anonymity is quaranteed. The survey will be destroyed after the data has been collected for our statistical purposes. Participation is entirely voluntary and you may cease participating at any time.

1.) Are you male___ or female___?

2.) What is your age?_____.

3.) Have you declared a major?____. If so, what is it?_____.

4.) Are your parents married___, divorced___, remarried following divorce___, &/or remarried following widowhood___, other_____?

5.) If divorced or remarried, how old were you when the divorce occured?____.

6.) If divorced or remarried, which parent did you live with after the divorce?_____.

7.) How would you describe your relationship with your parents? Rate on a scale of 1 to 5: (1 being least satisfied & 5 most satisfied)

Your relationship with your father?____.
Your relationship with your mother?____.

8.) Are you currently married___, or involved in a relationship___?

9.) If so, how long have you been married/involved?_____.

10.) Are you satisfied with your marriage/relationship? Rate on a scale of 1 to 5: (1 being least satisfied & 5 most satisfied) _____.

11.) How would you describe your level of commitment? Low___ Medium___ High___

12.) At what age did you begin dating?____.

13

** If you are presently married, skip to question #18 please.

13.) How often do you date?

Once a week___, or Two or more times a week___, or
Every other week___, or Once a month___, or Other_____.

14.) Are you satisfied with the amount of dating you do? Yes___ No___

Rate on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being least satisfied & 5 most satisfied)____.
If not satisfied, would you date more___ or less___?

15.) If you are not currently involved in a relationship, are you interested in becoming involved in a committed relationship? Yes___ No___

16.) Would you like to be married in the future? Yes___ No___
If so, then when? Less than 5 yrs.___ 5-10___ 10-15___ 16+___

17.) Would you like to live with someone before getting married?___.
If so, for approximately how long?_____.

18.) How would you describe a committed relationship?

19.) How do you feel about premarital sex?
Rate on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 is strong disapproval & 5 is strong approval)
_____.

** The next few questions are of a personal nature. If you prefer not to answer questions of a personal nature, please proceed to question #24. All responses will be anonymous and held strictly confidential. You may stop at any time.

20.) At what age did you first become sexually active?
Before 14___ 14-16___ 17-19___ 20-22___ After 22___ None of these___

21.) Are you currently sexually active? Yes___ No___

22.) Are you satisfied with your frequency of sexual activity?

Rate on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being least satisfied & 5 most satisfied)_____.
If not, would you prefer it to be more___ or less___ frequent?

23.) Are you sexually fulfilled or satisfied?

Rate on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being least satisfied & 5 most satisfied)_____.

24.) Please describe some of your general feelings about the opposite sex.

25.) OPEN COMMENTS: Do you have any final comments or observations?

THANK YOU for your participation. Remember that all surveys will be destroyed after the data is collected. Results will be available upon request.

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